

# **The botanic garden tourism gaze: perceptions & (re)presentations**

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## **Introduction**

Botanic Gardens (BGs) were once the preserve of the elite, and mainly for botanical research and colonial government's economic agendas. Roles of BGs are changing and there is a need for the development of strategic management, informed decision-making, innovation, entrepreneurship and diversification (Garrod, Pickering & Willis, 1993; Connell, 2005; Kimberley, 2009; Jones, 2010; Drea, 2011; Nex, 2012; Tighe, 2012; Everett, 2013; Benfield, 2013; Michaels, 2013).

Perceptions of 3 Botanic Gardens (BGs) frame the context of this exploratory study; scoping and considering the depth and breadth of perceptions to inform the development of BGs as visitor attractions. It also assists in the development of understanding the Botanic Garden (BG) tourism gaze (Connell & Meyer 2004; Connell, 2005; Urry & Larsen, 2011; Moskwa & Crilley, 2012; Nex, 2012; Benfield, 2013).

A guiding research question for this study was 'What are the perceived strengths and areas for development for 3 BGs across the UK as visitor attractions? Key findings revealed the need for these BGs to strengthen public perception of their value. Results across perceptions presented and represented a range of key concepts and themes. In particular, the study provides a model for managers to use for understanding and developing place making of BGs, which can serve to inform and develop marketing and operational management outputs. These insights, although focused on BGs can be applied to a range of gazes across other visitor attractions, places and spaces.

## **Literature Review**

There is a dearth of literature on BGs tourism and visitor attractions management. It is a segment of the tourism industry that is lesser known and understood, highlighting a considerable gap in academic study despite the popularity and phenomenon of garden tourism (Connell, 2005; Leask, 2010; Benfield, 2013).

BGs face a range of challenges due to funding cuts, changing roles and the need for a strategic approach to marketing and management (Jones, 2010; Tighe, 2012; Lean, 2015;

Misstear, 2015, 2016); Standing down from her post, Dr. Rosie Plummer, Director of National BGs Wales stated: '*the gardens have to be more commercial*' (Sample, 2015). Dr. Paul Smith, Secretary General of the BGCI (Botanic Gardens Conservation International) states: '*the lack of knowledge of strengths and weaknesses leads to poor decision making*'; making reference to Kew BGs' current challenges (Richardson, 2015). As a consequence many BGs are suffering by not making enough monies to balance outgoings, maintenance and all those other all-important elements of sustainable businesses; budgets, staffing and resources have been cut and therefore such BG heritage is under threat (Jones, 2010; Nex, 2012; Michaels, 2013). Vergou & Willison (2016) highlight the need for BGs to evolve, to redefine their purpose to meet new challenges and expand on roles, responsibilities and opportunities to diversify.

Botanic Gardens (BGs) as visitor attractions need to adapt to an ever-increasing and demanding visitor experience economy yet at the same time communicating their importance and value. Most BGs now rely on attracting visitors and membership in order to survive. Many have ceased to run as effective commercial ventures and have suffered as a result of not diversifying and strategically managing core and potential visitor experience economies. There is a need for BGs to improve efficacy as visitor attractions by developing innovative models of good practice in approaches to strategic management; to ensure sustainable business planning is in place for those BGs lacking such capacity, provision and resources (Garrod, Pickering & Willis, 1993; Connell & Meyer 2004; Connell, 2005; Moskwa & Crilley, 2012; Nex, 2012; Benfield, 2013).

## **Methodology**

This is an exploratory study which serves to highlight perceptions linked to 3 Botanic Gardens (BGs) across the UK; in order to better understand the BG tourism gaze, perceptions of BGs as visitor attraction place and space, and related management contexts.

Reviews of similar BGs were used as the foci of the study; as representatives of these were interested in this research. Awareness was generated via an online newsletter sent out to BGs highlighting this research; and these 3 BGs were the first to respond to the newsletter.

Email, VoIP and site visits ensued, and a dialogue was formed.

Analysis of 586 online reviews, comments and perceptions from 2007 to 2017 follows qualitative methodology techniques utilising a combination of manual and automatic text analysis; to highlight perceived strengths and areas for development of BGs. Content was manually reviewed then automatically coded across analytical software offering validity,

reliability and integrity of findings (Veal, 2011; Krippendorff, 2013; Sotiriadous, Brouwers & Le, 2014; Neuendorf, 2016).

Reviews were manually inputted into tabular format, drawing on content within a Likert-type or rating scale items of 5 to 1 star. Content from each item was captured in separate spreadsheets and saved as CSV files. These were then automatically coded via qualitative data analysis software to identify high level concepts, links between concepts and the generation of themes.

## **Findings**

Overall, 586 reviews of 3 similar BGs were analysed. 506 of the reviews were initially associated with strengths and 80 associated with areas for development. However a mix of both strengths and areas for development became apparent across the scale of items; with positive sentiments and more unfavourable terms as part of individual 5 to 1 star reviews. An example of this can be found across a range of quotes, which were identified during manual inputting of reviews for tabular analysis before automatic analyses using qualitative data analysis software. On the whole there are positive sentiments toward the BGs. Greater volume of reviews were highlighted across 2 of the BGs with the other needing to develop communications and online resources and presence. Graphical outputs from qualitative data analysis software and typed review quotes highlight key concepts and themes for each of these Likert-type scale or rating items. Key findings revealed the need for these 3 BGs to strengthen public perception of their importance and value.

## **Conclusions**

This study has attempted to highlight perceptions of BGs to develop resources and a model for practitioners to use for understanding and developing place making of BGs. These BGs need to strengthen public perception of their purpose, importance and value in terms of scientific discovery, conservation, education, culture and heritage. This study could serve to inform and aid development of marketing and operational management outputs; to ensure more active core missions of BGs, shaping future perceptions with the hope that the importance and value of BGs are better understood.

Recommendations for future studies would be to include other BGs, tag lines, headings and linking content, to elements of events' diaries and components of tourism systems alongside visitor typology, language and demographic information; and to triangulate studies across other online content gleaned from social media, blogs and vlogs.

Capturing BG consumption and tourism gaze via images visitors upload would also be an insight worthy of analysis.

It is hoped that future studies would continue to critically map the ecology of BGs to enable a more strategic approach to marketing and managing BGs as part of macro and micro environment', regional, national and international tourism systems, mobilities and consumption.

Although this study has focused on BGs, it could also be applied to a range of gazes across other visitor attractions, places and spaces.

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